

What is Intellectual Freedom Today: An Indigenous Reflection

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Unuhia noatia te taniwha i te rua... (A line from the Lament for Te Haupa by Te Puakitawhiti)

Order is rooted in what has once broken out of order; the destructive exception becomes the new source of authority (Jaspers, 1971, p. 48)

Intellectual freedom, a hallmark of so-called modern democratic societies, signals the existence of repressive forces. Intellectual freedom as a mechanism, serves to challenge and confront such forces, and its excesses. It has a temporal component. Repressive forces that were once perhaps “order” become over time, as *order* serves an increasingly smaller group of a society, disorder or chaos, and forces that destabilise become imminent. For Jaspers (1971), a destabilising force becomes the catalyst and source for the emergence of a new *order*. It is because this external force destabilises existing order that violence and conflict becomes a very real possibility. Our histories are replete with those who have challenged existing *order* and have been subjected to violence, death and even attempts to change how we think. Because of the very real likelihood of some form of violence emerging from the expression of intellectual freedom, the right to, and the protection of, is, and ought to be taken very seriously. Intellectual freedom is a safeguard against autocracy and fascism.

Here, in New Zealand and other western democratic societies the threat of state sanctioned violence against individuals who express views that challenge

order is less of a possibility.¹ However this should not be assumed to equate to the absence of violence, nor the absence of oppressive forces. In the academy too such forces are rallied against academic freedom. Our performances as academics are assessed not by the originality of our thought as much as we might like to think. We are rewarded for conforming to established discourses by having our work accepted by ranked journals. External research funding brings performance rewards, however research funders very rarely fund work that strays too far from orthodoxy. That is not to say, original thought is not produced in universities, but rather the presence of forces that reward mediocrity and conformity to disciplinary and intellectual boundaries (L. R. Gordon, 2006). Jaspers observations reflected such forces and lamented the inability of a philosophy rooted in scientific orthodoxy to capture and reflect reality; human reality (1971). Such a quest, existentialists like Jaspers and Gordon argue, should not be abandoned or give way to an overly technocratic approach to producing knowledge (2006).

Intellectual freedom implies that one is or can be free from something, that something here being coercive power. Because we are always in relation to something, it is difficult to be completely free from this form of power. Intellectual freedom perhaps then provides brief transcendent moments where a dissenting voice might be heard, even if only momentarily.

Indigenous thought too have mechanisms that work against repressive and autocratic forces. For example, the coyote in Native American traditions, Anansi in West African and Afro-Caribbean traditions, and Maui in Polynesia are all tricksters who provide for challenges to the status quo. Furthermore, in Māori tradition taniwha (divine interlocutors) are harbingers or message bearers of impending change. Like those who use intellectual freedom they bring messages that are not always welcomed. The presence of taniwha signal an impending calamity or one that has occurred. The line “unuhia noatia te taniwha i te rua” in a lament is often a sign that a chief of great mana and influence has passed; such chiefs are then referred to as taniwha themselves, a reference to their ongoing influence of their mana (divine authority) in death. Usually translated as the “taniwha left its den” it is more accurate to say, “the taniwha was *drawn* from its den” signalling a relationship with the recipient of the message; in particular the actions of the recipient, or an incident of import to the recipient being the reason it was drawn from its den. Taniwha then are relational. They are mistakenly understood by Pākehā as mythical monsters and evoke one of two responses, as a monster they are something to be feared, or in our age of so called rational secularism, simply ignored. The first response suggests that the message bearer of impending danger has collapsed to become danger rather than a warning of danger; they in effect *become*

monsters and therefore must be attacked (J. A. Gordon & Gordon, 2009). Both responses however result in a comprehensive misreading of the message or warning.

As so often happens in modern society message bearing monster voices are attacked, and those who practice intellectual freedom require courage and fortitude in the face of such attacks. Think here of the vicious and unprecedented attack in 2015 by the Australian Abbott government on Emeritus Professor Gillian Triggs, who in her role as the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission spoke of the human rights violations by the Australian Government in their treatment of asylum seekers. Professor Triggs had a legal, if not moral, obligation to report on these violations. Emeritus Professor Ranginui Walker, who recently passed away, was often attacked by NZ politicians and the mainstream public for reflecting the discontent within the Māori community towards the state for repeated breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi and perpetuating racist colonial policies. Through Ranginui Walker's scholarship, the recollection of his deeds and his unswerving commitment to speak out against injustice in the face of belligerent oppositional forces, his influence too survives his death, as a *taniwha*.

¹ The NZ government has historically killed and imprisoned dissidents who challenged its *order*. Think here for example of Rua Kenana's people at Maungapōhatu who were attacked and killed by NZ police in 1916, Rua himself being imprisoned under the charge of sedition. Think also, of Samoa's "Black Saturday" in 1929 where peaceful demonstrators and chief Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III were shot and killed by NZ Police.

Gordon, J. A., & Gordon, L. R. (2009). *Of Divine Warning: Reading Disaster in the Modern Age*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers.

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Jaspers, K. (1971). *Philosophy of Existence* (R. F. Grabau, Trans.). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.